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Saving CIA secrecy

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From recent remarks by the Director of Central Intelligence at the National Press Club in Washington.

How will openness help us preserve secrets? Well, simply by reducing the excessive corpus of secrets that now exists within our government. Today so much information is unnecessarily classified that we have lost respect for the classified label. By making as much as possible available to the public, we reduce the amount that is kept secret. In turn this makes it easier to engender respect for that which remains classified.

It has become very suspect these days to even refer to withholding information in the name of national security. Abuse of this principle in the past, however, does not make it invalid today. Quite simply, there is information which it is not in the national interest to disclose. We cannot negotiate a SALT treaty if we cannot maintain the privacy of our negotiating position. We cannot afford to develop expensive weapons systems or devices for collecting intelligence and then tell those against whom we might have to employ them what their precise characteristics are.

Because, however, we in the world of intelligence are in the risk-taking business, and because there are dangers to our national fabric from the improper use of the intelligence process, clearly there must be special checks on us. I believe that there are such checks today and that the public can be more confident today than ever before that the abuses of the past will not reoccur.

We have established a thorough system of control mechanisms to govern our day-by-day activities. These start with two basic guidelines which are the framework within which all intelligence professionals now work. The first of these is that espionage must be considered an extraordinary remedy. Clandestine means of gathering information should never be utilized when the same information might be available openly. The second guideline is that actions which we take in secret must be defensible, in principle, in public.

Some activities, such as assassination, are so repugnant to our national standards as to warrant prohibition without exception. In some cases, however, total prohibition is a bit too rigid a position. Instead, we have injunctions which generally prohibit certain activities unless there is a specific authorization for them.

The most significant change in American intelligence in recent years, however, and one that is truly revolutionary is the introduction of effective external oversight from both the executive and legislative branches.

The congressional oversight committees are now in the process of legislating guidelines, prohibitions, and injunctions and further refining the oversight procedures themselves in what will be known as charters for the intelligence community. I strongly support this undertaking. In the first place it will provide the legal foundation for our activities. In the second place, it will provide guidance so that the US intelligence officer on the street in a foreign country and those of us in the headquarters will have a better idea of what is expected, what may not be done and what, if done, must be justified convincingly to our overseers.

I hope that you will recognize that when we balk, for instance, at disclosing all the secrets necessary to prosecute a case in court, we do not do so in an arbitrary manner. We study these cases very carefully. Moreover, we must be prepared to justify our positions not only to the Attorney General but to our oversight committees. How many so-called "whistle blowers" go through the oversight mechanisms that I have described where abuses and undue secrecy can be questioned without compromising legitimate secrets? I am suspicious as to their motivation and suggest that you might well be also. Further, when every elected or appointed public official is suspect and every renegade whistle blower is automatically accepted as a hero; when there is greater emphasis on criticizing and tearing down our society than on building it up, I suggest that we are heading for real trouble.